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SUBJECT: SERBIA'S CIVIL SOCIETY FEARS VIOLENCE, UNCERTAIN POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

REF: 07 BELGRADE 1744

Summary

¶1. (SBU) Serbia's NGO and civil society leaders are concerned about potential aggression against them in the aftermath of Kosovo's declaration of independence and following the February 21 attacks against diplomatic missions in Belgrade. Prominent NGO leaders are concerned that the campaign in the tabloid press against them could lead to them becoming the next target for violence. They expressed fears that growing uncertainty in the political climate would further diminish Serbia's toleration for dissent, stamping out alternative voices in civil society. Despite these concerns, NGOs continue their work but remain cautious. End summary.

NGO Leaders: Security a Concern, but Work Continues

¶2. (SBU) Serbia's NGO leaders are concerned for their safety and for those in society who advocate tolerance of Kosovo's independence. While there have been no incidents of physical aggression targeting human rights defenders in the aftermath of Kosovo's declaration of independence, verbal threats are on the rise, and NGO leaders are worried there is still a potential for violence following February 21 attacks against embassies. Head of the Lawyer's Committee for Human Rights (YUCOM) Biljana Kovecevic-Vuco told poloff February 26 that NGO leaders did not feel safe but were trying to conduct normal business, albeit with a lower profile. Sonja Biserko of the Helsinki Committee told poloff February 25 that overall, "things are calming down," but that of course no one can anticipate what will happen in the coming days or weeks. She said the window for "something serious to happen" had closed and she did not feel physically threatened.

¶3. (SBU) Other NGO leaders expressed more serious security concerns. Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR) head Andrej Nosov told poloff February 25 that YIHR had received "more threats than ever" over the past couple of days via emails, phone calls, and SMS. One such threat following a February 22 "Justice for Kosovo - Change for Serbia" position paper posted on YIHR's website stated "we are going to kill you." Natasa Kandic of the Humanitarian Law Center (HLC) told poloff her offices were attacked February 21 when protesters threw a road flare at her building. She said the police failed to provide security for the center despite direct requests to Police Director Milorad Veljovic. Though fearful of future attacks, she still continued working from her office.

An Uncertain Political Climate

¶4. (SBU) NGO leaders expressed concerns that growing political uncertainty in Serbia was restricting a free civil society. Kandic warned of the radicalization of the Serbian political environment

following Kosovo's declaration of independence. Andrej Nosov blamed the Serbian government for the February 21 violence and for fostering political uncertainty. "Following Kostunica's statements at the rally, he and those associated with him are no longer democratic forces in this country," he said. Singling out a February 20 statement by Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) leader Ivica Dacic that the government should ban all political parties and NGOs that recognize an independent Kosovo she said, such comments "radicalize a population already in the grip of nationalist fervor, and seek to marginalize voices of civil society and the NGO sector that promote the protection of human rights and justice for victims."

Democratic Party Silent

15. (SBU) NGO leaders complain that the Democratic Party remains mostly silent in face of such verbal attacks on civil society. Nosov told poloff that the DS had not had a consistent, comprehensive strategy for the past year, and therefore could not effectively develop or direct messages of support for civil society. Nosov doubted the leadership of the DS had the capacity, the understanding, or full recognition of the seriousness of the current situation to actually do something about it. Dusan Bogdanovic of YUCOM echoed this sentiment, adding sharp criticism toward Tadic. "Tadic himself is a puppet. Thanks to his intellectual impairment, he is unable to grasp the gravity of the current situation," he said. He added it was doubtful Tadic and those in the DS close to him would come out with a tough stand against the hardliners, fearing their own skeletons would be dragged out of the closet. Bogdanovic cited irregularities during Tadic's previous appointments in the Telecommunications and Defense Ministries that could come back to haunt him. Kovacevic-Vuco said Tadic was unsure the DS could win a majority in parliamentary elections when they are called, and therefore did not want to rock the boat.

NGOs Unite Against Ilic's Hate Speech and Threats

16. (U) NGOs in Serbia are coordinating to respond to this government sanctioned hostile environment and are now speaking out. The NGO alliance "Group of 44" released an open letter February 29 blasting Infrastructure Minister Velimir Ilic for inciting violence against political opponents. The letter specifically noted Ilic's comments that Serbian authorities "cannot prevent those coming from Kosovo from beating those who run the campaign that Kosovo is not ours." The letter said Ilic had called "for violence against political opponents," specifically the Liberal Democratic Party. The NGOs said that "never in Serbian history, not even under Milosevic, had Serbian authorities called for violence against political opponents." NGOs demanded that President Tadic "unambiguously" reject calls for violence and asked for Ilic's prosecution. The Group of 44 includes the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, Civic Initiatives, YUCOM and others.

Comment

17. (SBU) While human rights NGOs and others in civil society have long voiced concern about Serbia's diminishing toleration for dissent, they are increasingly worried about their own security and ability to openly operate. Post will remain in close contact with the NGO community and will continue to evaluate the most effective means to strengthen our partnerships to achieve our common goal of a secure, democratic Serbia. End comment.

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